

“See, I am making all things new.”

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Revelation 21:1-27

We've now come to the climax of the book of Revelation. In fact, it's the climax of human history. Evil has been destroyed and the stage is set for new life for all the faithful. There is a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. God is making everything new, but the best part is that God will be living among us. There will no longer be sin to separate us from God. The result is that we will experience God's love and presence more fully. Psalm 16:11 says about God, "...In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand there are pleasures forevermore." In his vision, John hears a loud voice from the throne, "See, the home of God is among mortals, He will dwell with them as their God, they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more..." (v.4) This is what it will be like to live fully in God's presence. Do we long for the day when we will be able to experience this kind of intimacy with God? Does this vision of the future make a difference for how you live today?

In John's vision is of a new heaven and earth, the original Greek word for heaven could also mean "sky." So, it could mean all the physical creation, earth, sea, and sky, everything. The whole cosmos had been tainted by the effects of sin, death and decay. But now, everything will be renewed. The new reality will be free from sin, the thing that separates us from God. It's interesting to note how, in verse one, "the sea was no more." The ancient understanding of the sea was that it is a fearful place of chaos. Storms at sea were probably the most powerful things people could experience at the time. The sea represented separation from God. In the new heaven and new earth, there would no longer be that fearful separation.

The renewal of heaven and earth in Revelation is strongly connected with God's creation of the world in Genesis. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were experiencing paradise. They were living in harmony with nature, and they had a close relationship with God. God would even walk with them in the garden. But then, tempted by a serpent, Adam and Eve decide to go their own way, and disobey God. The results were catastrophic. Their relationship with each other, with God, and with creation was broken. They blamed each other for their sin, they would have to work hard to get food to grow because their sin caused the earth to be cursed. And, when God came to see them, they hid themselves. (Their relationship with God was also broken). Sin caused harm in all these different relationships, but God continued to reach out to people.

Throughout the Old Testament of the Bible God sent prophets to help them understand the best ways to live, but because of sin, the people keep messing up. Finally, God sent his divine Son, Jesus. The prophet Isaiah called him, "Emmanuel" which means "God with us." In Jesus, we see God's desire to have a close relationship with us. Sin separated us from God, but God restored our relationship through the sacrifice of Jesus. Through his death and resurrection, we see the love and power of God. We no longer need fear the effects of sin, but we still struggle with its influence. At the end of time, sin and death will finally be destroyed, all the relationships in God's creation will be restored and we'll again be able to live together with God.

God's words in verse six emphasise how everything will be complete. "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end..." Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They symbolize how God is the source of all creation as well as the final destination of history. These words connect with both the creation story in Genesis as well as Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. In Genesis chapter 2, we read, "the heavens and the earth were finished...God finished the work he had done and rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done." It was done! God created the universe! It was the amazing beginning of human history. Then, centuries later, out of love, Jesus hung on a cross. Just before dying he cried out, "It is finished!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John chapter 19, verse 30) Through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ we now

have forgiveness of sin. We can now live without the pressure of trying to measure up by keeping rules. Instead, we live by the grace of Christ, giving us power over sin. And, we now look forward to the day when sin and death will no longer be a part of our world, a day when God will renew heaven and earth.

My image of heaven is closer to the Japanese countryside than it is to a crystal city. It's very possible that heaven will be more like our world than we realise, except without sin and sadness. In fact, when God first created the world, God made it very good. We see God's fingerprints on all the different and amazing animals, plants, and insects. We see God's image in the vast multitude of different people God has created. We see God's infinite power and beauty in space, where there are countless stars, planets and galaxies. Most scholars agree that, according to Revelation, our world will be renewed, transformed into something new, but not something that is totally alien to us. God will take our sin-stained earth, and our sin-stained bodies and renew us.

So, we have a vision of a new sky and a new earth. The cosmos has been renewed, no longer tainted by sin. Here, John also sees an image of a "New Jerusalem." It's an image of a renewed society, with God as the architect and builder. Scholars generally agree that this is an image of the heavenly city where the faithful will live with God for eternity. Notice that this image of heaven isn't a place where the faithful are taken up to, in space somewhere. Instead, we have the image of a holy city coming down to us, to a renewed earth! God doesn't take us up to heaven somewhere and then burn up our planet. Instead, God comes to us (just like Jesus came from heaven to live among us). In some Bible passages, images of fire are used to show that things will be purified, or the idea of huge change. Many of the things we hold onto will be gone in the future, just like fire can destroy many things. Our old life and all of sin's effects will one day be destroyed. This is needed to make way for the new.

The image of a new Jerusalem comes from the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel. At the end of the book of Ezekiel, he describes a city representing the tribes of Israel. The name would be "The Lord is there" (Ez.48:35) In Revelation, the city is similar, but has much larger dimensions, and represents not just Jewish people. It symbolizes a society of God's faithful, peoples of every nation and language... The city is a direct contrast to Babylon, the city of evil followers of the beast. The introduction to "New Jerusalem" follows the same wording as the introduction to Babylon back at the beginning of chapter 17, "...one of the angels who had the seven bowls...came and said to me, Come, I will show you...". In chapter 17 Babylon is shown as the impure image of a whore. Here, in chapter 21, the new Jerusalem is described as a pure bride, "the wife of the Lamb." And, the Lamb is one of the prominent symbols in Revelation representing Jesus Christ. Describing his faithful followers (or the church) as his bride shows an intimate relationship. God wants to be with us!

The new city would have the glory of God and the radiance of a rare jewel. The light of God would fill everything since there would be no darkness of sin present. There would be 12 gates representing the 12 tribes of Israel, and 12 foundations representing the 12 Apostles of Jesus. This city would represent not just Jewish people. It would include all the faithful of the world. The various jewels could symbolize various things, but in the end, they represent the most valuable things people in biblical times could imagine. People knew about gold, pearls, and various jewels, but to find large jewels that were pure and clear would have been extremely rare. Here, this enormous city is built on the purity and radiance of jewels, representing the purity, glory, beauty, and perfection of God.

The dimensions of the city are beyond earthly imagination. Its length, width, and height were each 12,000 stadia, with a wall of 144 cubits. Notice all the 12's! (12x1000, 12x12). They represent the faithful tribes of Israel and the faithful followers of Jesus. The city measurements translated to today would equal about 2,220 km in each direction – a huge perfect cube! The ancient Hebrews saw the cube as the perfect shape, so this city symbolizes God's splendor and perfection. The city wall, would translate to about 65 metres – a pretty stubby wall for a city 2,220 km high! It's seems to make the most sense to take these numbers symbolically.

It's interesting that twice in this chapter it says that the faithless, or the unclean, or those who practice falsehood and so on would not be a part of this new community. But, earlier in Revelation there are several places where the unfaithful and the wicked were punished and destroyed such as through the image of a purifying "lake of fire." Throughout the book many themes of judgement are repeated.

Those who followed the beast were often described as "the nations" and "the kings." Yet, in today's image of the heavenly city, it says nations and kings would walk by its light. Apparently, there would be those who repent and turn to follow Jesus. And, isn't it curious that the city gates would "never be shut..."? Think about it. Who would be outside the city gates? Isn't it those who have rejected God, or those who are not part of the faithful? According to this text, some scholars believe that the city gate will always be open to those who have separated themselves from God. Maybe God can wait for all eternity until they have repented and decided to enter God's kingdom. There is a lot of debate over the meaning of this, as well as other parts of Revelation. As with many passages in the Bible, no one can legitimately claim to know the entire truth. We are all on journeys of understanding. There will always be more to learn from God's living word. Even if the details are sometimes mysterious to us, we can still learn important themes as we study, and apply them to life. The words of the Bible are alive, and they must match what we see in Jesus, God's "Word," revealed as a person.

Whatever image we have of heaven, we can be sure that it will be a place where God is living among us. It will be a place of renewal, where the pain of sin and death will be no more. And, it will be the fulfilment of our deepest longing. Many try to fill this longing with marriage, money, or family, but nothing can fill that empty spot except Jesus Christ. We are all created by God. Until we are living together with God, without the influence of sin getting in the way, we will always have a deep longing for fellowship with our creator. Through Jesus, we already get a taste of this connection with God. It gives us strength and courage to face life's challenges. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul says, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" He concludes that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Even though we have victory over sin, through Jesus, we still experience the pain of sin in our world. But, we live with the hope that someday, John's vision of the future will become today's reality, and sin and death will be no more. Let's pray.

Almighty God, thank-you that you are the ruler of all history, the beginning and the end. Thank-you that you have already triumphed over sin and death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We look forward to the day you will finally get rid of all evil, and establish your kingdom of peace on earth. There are so many people who struggle these days, many because of the effects of the pandemic. We long for an end to sadness. Thank-you that out of love you have given us a taste of your kingdom through Jesus. Thank-you that we need not work hard to reach you, but that instead, out of love, you have come down to our level. Helps us to not forget that reality. May we live with this hope and strength, even in the face of life's challenges. Through Christ we pray, Amen.